

The women's art museum is back. It looks good. Is it actually better?

The galleries have an improved design but do not necessarily serve the art within



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If you were going to pick a building to house a major museum of women's art, the current location on New York Avenue would not likely be at the top of the list. The National Museum of Women in the Arts, which opened in 1987, lives in a wedge-shaped 1908 structure originally designed as a Masonic Temple. The Masons, originally and still largely an all-male fraternity, have always been secretive about their rites, and they have never been big on street-level transparency when it comes to architecture.

But the museum has made the best of its imposing home, which is stately and well placed in the center of the District. Now, after a two-year closure and a \$67.5 million renovation, it is reopening, offering it a chance to reintroduce itself to the public. The galleries have been redesigned, internal systems updated and access for the disabled improved. Gallery space in the 93,000-square-foot structure has increased by some 2,500 square feet, educational spaces improved and the collection reinstalled.

"We flirted with the idea of a change of venue, but the costs for a new building were astronomical," says museum director Susan Fisher Sterling. Instead, museum officials chose to renovate the historic structure to a state-of-the-art facility, with better art storage, improved lighting and climate control, enhanced digital technology and a new system for hanging art from the ceiling, which was always a problem in the old galleries.

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The most visible and agreeable change is to the flow of the galleries. Visitors access them from the elevators on the west side, and rather than a warren of small rooms as in the old configuration, the galleries now flow through the length of the building, with clear sight lines defining its triangular shape. Rather than enclosed rooms, the art is displayed in alcoves projecting from both sides of the space, suitable for smaller works, with room for larger works in the 1997 annex, now clearly visible from the gallery entrance. These improvements, part of the redesign by architect Sandra Parsons Vicchio, make the galleries much more intuitively accessible.

“Wayfinding was not intuitive,” Vicchio says of the old layout, which tended to work best for exhibitions of historical works and paintings, but often felt constrained for larger sculpture, installation works and contemporary pieces. Deputy director and chief curator Kathryn Wat is particularly excited by a new “Unistrut” system for hanging heavy works from the ceiling.

“I was often sending our crew up into the ceiling to find an I-beam, so if I needed to place a suspended sculpture, they would be climbing around looking for a good spot to hang it,” Wat says. Now, with a gridlike structure, heavy work can be placed almost anywhere. She has taken advantage of that freedom in a temporary exhibition called “The Sky’s the Limit,” which includes sculpture, with many works suspended from the ceiling, by Rina Banerjee, Sonya Clark, Petah Coyne, Alison Saar and Yuriko Yamaguchi.

The past two years, while the museum was closed, have witnessed the acceleration of a welcome trend gathering force for a decade at least: Mainstream museums are devoting more space and curatorial energy to the display and reevaluation of art by women. In September, when the Smithsonian American Art Museum reopened its modern and contemporary galleries, it underscored the increase in works by women, now 42 percent of the collection, which is almost reaching parity with men.

The larger picture, which includes major retrospectives, acquisitions and auction sales of art by women is more complex, and an enormous amount of work remains to be done. But the battle is at least engaged, which raises a question: What is the role of the NMWA now that there is broader support, including many allies, in the promotion of its original mission — the promotion, display and study of art by women?

Sterling has an answer. “When I envision the NMWA of the future, I have enough hubris to look at the Museum of Modern Art’s trajectory,” she says, invoking the behemoth institution in New York that in many ways invented modern art as a discipline. “It was the first museum for modern art, and even though many of the great museums now exhibit modern art, it is still seen as the flagship.”

Wat endorses that but adds, “I am hopeful, but I don’t know if this is systemic change, yet. It remains to be seen if we’ll have lasting change.”

For both those reasons, if the museum wants to be the leader in the field and continue the work of rediscovering and centering the art of women, it should reconsider the display of its permanent collection, which is one of the few disappointments of the reopening. They have followed the trend, which is deemed popular with audiences, of “thematic” display, mixing up genera, forgoing the usual categories of genres and media and dispensing with chronological display.

This does a disservice to older and historic art, which is one strength of the NMWA collection of some 6,000 works by 1,500 artists. Themes like “Seeing Red” and “No Shrinking Violet,” which use color and hues to group works, are insubstantial and miss the opportunity to foreground the challenges and opportunities faced by women from the 16th century to the present. Just because they feature red does not make works of different scales, media and periods congenial. An imposing 16th-century marriage portrait and a small 21st-century color print need room to speak in their own distinct language.

This is not to argue for a relentless march from the Renaissance to the present, or that color choices and palettes are not gendered in significant ways. But greater care needs to be taken to introduce history and context. Works that are remote from the sensibilities of contemporary audiences need room to breathe on their own terms. If possible, removing the glass plating from the older paintings would help, though that can expose them to damage and sometimes vandalism. And poor Rosa Bonheur, one of the great figures in 19th-century painting, is relegated to a back gallery.

This is, of course, a matter of taste. It seems almost universal now that contemporary curators dislike history and find it an encumbrance. But the vast majority of these same scholars have had substantial grounding in the history and categories that they somehow conclude are of no interest or value to audiences. The history is problematic, to be sure, and many categories are at least partially arbitrary and obscure essential truths. But they are an indispensable scaffolding for making sense of art, and without them audiences are left with impressions but not ideas, and impressions are fleeting.

The larger question is the purpose and identity of the NMWA, which has always tried to balance the remediation of a missing history of women artists with the promotion of contemporary leaders in the field. In the new display, the pendulum has swung too far from the coherent presentation of history, but perhaps it will swing back in future iterations. It is, in any case, good to have the museum back doing its essential work once again. As it continues to evolve its mission, it should consider this option: Now the field is mostly empty when it comes to rethinking the larger, centuries-long trajectory and historical continuity of art by women.